

Portland Harbor Superfund Site – Local Stories

Transcript: Wilma Alcock, Portland Harbor Community Coalition

Good afternoon, evening, people. My name is Wilma Alcock and I am a member of Portland Harbor Community Coalition. And what I'd like to share with you as we open is a metaphor in prose that I wrote. I will now begin it.

As he gazed upon the water, the river was slowly becoming a place that was drawing all manner of things into itself. Toxic drugs, PCBs, and manners of things of all kinds of debris. She was looking like an overdressed matron trying to pretend that she was a picture of her former self. But the rains were acid, and the city was stifling, and the river was slowly dying. Her exuberance lost and nothing to refresh herself with, the streams were being polluted before they reached her. She could only pull herself through the bed of ancient carvings and land made by volcanoes that erupted eons ago. When she was just a young stream, before life happened. Before progress happened.

He looked upon the water and could see sewage was seeping into her again. Must call the authorities of water preservation again, make the plea again. "Can't people see what is happening to the environment, with their luxury of living in the now?" he mused. Now I know what is meant by the good old days. Thinking back to when he was young, swimming in the river, and eating the delicious fish. Now it was posted: "Don't swim in the river." "Don't eat the fish." Speeding across the bridges in their new model cars, going to high-powered jobs. Can they not see that my friend, my river, is dying?

The room was crowded with protestors stating their case one by one. And he felt vindicated that others had seen his distress of the [unintelligible]. They were raising their voices, chanting, "She has done her job as a river. We must save her. We can save her. We will save her." And the river heard their voices and decided to delay her dying until help could come. Don't let her wait too long.

And with that being said, that was a metaphor that I wrote about the river.

I was raised here in the city. We came here in 1943. I'm 83 years old and I'm proud of that. People say if you tell your age you'll tell anything. Well, that's okay. As an African-American person, my parents worked in the shipyard. We migrated from Kansas to Portland. And my dad worked at Swan Island Shipyard. He was a paint-chipper, chipping off the paint of the ships so they could be repainted. And because of that, it polluted the river, but it also polluted my dad. My dad died in 1988 of cancer of the lungs, mesothelioma. Nobody was talking about it too much then, but now people are more aware of it. But he was impacted by the work that he did, because it affected his lungs. So much so that we stayed here from 1943 until 1945, or was it '46? Probably the beginning of '46. And we went back to Lawrence, Kansas, because my dad wanted me to go to university there. But because his health had been so impacted by the pollution he had accumulated in his body over the years, he could no longer stay in that dry climate. He had got acclimated to this wet climate. So within nine months, we were back again. They had saved money to buy a home. We had bought a house, and had to sell the house, and came back to Portland. And so we were impacted that way, by the environment that we lived in.

But we came back to Portland, bought a house in the Albina District. And my parents, who really love the outdoors, they took me fishing. And fished the Willamette Slough, and we fished the Sellwood Bridge, and we fished also at Oregon City near the river. And it was just really a lot of fun, because it wasn't quite as polluted then as it is now. But we were beginning to see the pollution. Because, on the Willamette Slough, they were dumping sewage in there from the [unintelligible] houses and so that impacted it a lot. So I saw the beginning, or at least the beginning, of a lot of pollution that you see now. We would also fish down at Mock's Bottom. It no longer is on the map. Mock's Bottom was a marshland that was just below Mock's crest. Now, it's industrialized, because Swan Island has made it all industrial apartments there. But the river's up under it. It knows where it is, it knows where its body is. We'll see how that looks after a while.

So anyway I would like to just share with you that my parents were conservative when it comes to nature and the land and fish. My daddy instilled in me at a very young age to not take more than you can eat. And if the fish is too small, throw it back so it can grow to be a larger fish. So they instilled that in me, and also to really take care of the environment. If we come upon a place to fish, we never leave trash. If there was trash there, we pick that up too. Because they told me, leave a place better than you found it. And I kind of take that through my life, not only in the environment but in the room where I come, I would like to leave it better than I came into it. And I love the fact that I'm working with these wonderful people at PHCC. I may not get to see some of the things we're fighting so hard for, but everybody has to make a contribution and I hope that my contribution will be of value to this group. So thank you for listening to me this afternoon, this evening. I hope and bless that each one of you have a very wonderful afternoon and evening. And that you just know that positive attitude goes a lot farther down the river than the negative.

And with that being said, I will return it to Lucila.